

**Commodification, Corporatization, Complicity and Crisis:
The University in Contemporary South Africa¹**

**2023 Nelson Mandela Legacy Lecture of the
South African Education Research Association**

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¹ My sincere thanks to all those comrades and colleagues who kindly commented on the final draft of this lecture. Your incisive comments and urging to develop some issues helped to strengthen the lecture and provided rich ideas for work beyond this paper. Responsibility for the content of the lecture is, ultimately, mine alone.

Introduction

Thank you for the honour of delivering the 2023 Nelson Mandela Legacy Lecture of the South African Education Research Association.

The theme of this year's conference is *Education(al) Foundations, Education(al) Futures*, and I have been invited to disrupt and complicate settled narratives, ask uncomfortable questions, and pay uncompromising attention to social justice.² I warmly embrace your invitation. "Ruthless criticism" was "one of Karl Marx's principal maxims"³ – "ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be."⁴ Marx "applied the ... maxim to his own views too, constantly discerning what was genuine and what was false in what he had written,"⁵ always "wide open to empirical evidence." His "concepts and definitions were open-ended and adaptable to new and changing historical situations."⁶ Judith Butler clarifies that Marx practices the "ruthless critique not of 'everything existing,' exactly, but of everything established, even institutionalized as the establishment over time."⁷

Critique, of ideas, conditions and the existing state of affairs, is the process of self-clarification and clarification with others to inform social action to transform "human society in the interest of its perfection and welfare."⁸ It is a reminder that human societies are ultimately made by the ideas and actions of people and can be understood through reason of a "democratic, secular, and open character", that humans have the "capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, and dully", to enlighten themselves and emancipate themselves by changing their societies.⁹ Scholars and intellectuals have a pivotal role to play in critique. As Edward Said observes, "the intellectual always has a choice either to side with the less represented, the forgotten or ignored, or to side with the powerful,"¹⁰ implying that no middle ground or neutrality is possible.

In this lecture I will offer a view on the fundamental *foundations* of universities, meditate on the processes and actions that have bequeathed commodified, corporatized, crisis-ridden universities

² Social justice is part of the conceptual apparatus of classical liberalism that can take conservative (the minimal state) and radical forms (the welfare state). There is, therefore, a need to clarify what conception of social justice one has in mind. What kind of social structure, economic arrangements and state are envisaged as underpinning social justice? I thank Prof Mala Singh for this point.

³ D'Mello, B. (2018) Karl Marx: 'ruthless criticism of all that exists', <https://mronline.org/2018/05/07/karl-marx-ruthless-criticism-of-all-that-exists/>

⁴ Letters from the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher (1843) Marx to Ruge, Kreuznach, September, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm

⁵ D'Mello, B. (2018)

⁶ D'Mello, B. (2018)

⁷ Butler, J. (2016) Philosophy has become worldly: Marx on ruthless critique, *PMLA*, Vol. 131, No. 2, pp. 460-468, p. 460.

⁸ O'Malley, J. (ed.) (1970) *Introduction to Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xiv. See though Hardy, H. (ed.) (1991) *Isiah Berlin - The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. New York: Alfred Knopf, chapter 1.

⁹ Said, E. (2004) *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.11

¹⁰ Said, E. W. (1996) *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 32-33.

in contemporary South Africa and offer some ideas on a different *future* for our universities that breaks with their current dubious trajectories. I will argue that renewed South African universities will not come into being through epistemological and theoretical work alone, only through political action and struggles by individuals and social groups committed to a different kind of society predicated on other logics than the destructive and dehumanising logic of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. But first, a response to your questions: ‘What does Nelson Mandela mean for the great task of education? Is there a *Mandela* approach to education? What would make Mandela *educational* as opposed to simply or just inspirational.’

Mandela and education

I can be brief because Crain Soudien has addressed these issues superbly. For Soudien, a critical lesson from Mandela is how individuals can manage themselves “in the maelstrom of modernity with all its contradictions and possibilities.”¹¹ Madiba “represents in significant ways what...a thoughtful, ontology represents in modernity” – “an awareness of oneself in the relational ecology of social difference.” It “is the capacity to live, relationally, in a fully aware sense, of one’s own capacity to do good or evil and the capacity to look for good and evil in the larger social world in which one lives.” Of “relevance for modernity”, it brings “together the full spectrum of one’s knowledges, and puts them to work ethically.”¹²

Soudien sets out the qualities of an *educational discussion*. It is “one in which [there is] the possibility of a shift...from one state of conscious being to another *better* position, better in its cognitive grasp of a matter, better in the intellectual framing in which the matter is placed, and better, in the control that a subject has of his or her own thinking in relation to the matter.”¹³

In an educational discussion, participants “experience through it a sense of having come to not just an *enhanced* understanding of a matter but fundamentally also an awareness of [their] own relationship to it. [They] comes out of it with a greater ability to locate [themselves] and the personal implications of this emplacement.”¹⁴ If schooling is an

induction into a way of thinking, an educational discussion is...about bringing one to a point where there is recognition of the logics which inform particular ways of thinking, the assumptions with which a line of reasoning might begin, the descriptions used and the explanations which follow, an understanding of their differences, and, critically, an awareness of the personal implications of all of these for one.”¹⁵

The educational extends to “the acknowledgement of contradiction”, structural and personal, to taking “charge of one’s subjectivity” and knowing, and to possess “a ‘will to act’, a will which is [one’s] own, nobody else’s”. It extends too to the rights of each “to fashion his [or her] individuality and the right of others, likewise, to do this.”¹⁶ Madiba exemplifies the will to be

¹¹ Soudien, C. (2017a) An Introduction: Nelson Mandela and His Significance for Education. In Soudien, C. (ed.) (2017) *Nelson Mandela: Comparative Perspectives of His Significance for Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 1-7, p. 5.

¹² Soudien, C. (2017a) p. 5.

¹³ Soudien, C. (2017) The Provocation of Nelson Mandela, pp. 165-181. In Soudien, C. (ed.) (2017) *Nelson Mandela: Comparative Perspectives of His Significance for Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p. 166.

¹⁴ Soudien, C. (2017b), p. 166.

¹⁵ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 166.

¹⁶ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 168.

master of one's "own destiny", of holding fast and uncompromisingly to one's dignity as the condition of respectful engagement, to accord to others what one demands for oneself and "for a way of being in the modern which grappled with its hegemonic limits."¹⁷ His "intense educational provocation" is his reconstitution of "the possibilities of what it [means] to be *human* beyond the familiarity and hegemony" of coloniality, racial capitalism and modernity, of endeavouring to locate ourselves "on a larger modern space – beyond its hegemonies", a *boundness*, with all its contradictions".¹⁸ In affirming his will, Mandela also affirms "his own difference", wherein lies "an educational provocation for each of us: How each of us comes to understand our difference, own will to power, how we understand this will to power outside of the historical compulsions of our birth, our 'race', class, gender, culture."¹⁹ Education is learning to know how these compulsions are maintained and reproduced and seeing "them as they are and for what they are, knowledges with histories, histories made by human subjects and not knowledges brought to us from some unknowable space. Power is in us."²⁰

I have observed in the same volume that Soudien writes that Madiba's comment that "to be free is ...to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others," as "the true test of our devotion to freedom", symbolises a powerful respect for difference, equity, diversity and inclusion."²¹ In more critical vein, while there is much to laud about Mandela's life, Soudien may be too effusive and insufficiently attentive to the discontinuities between the pre- and post-1990 Mandela and the distinction between Mandela the anti-apartheid leader and Mandela the post-1994 South African president. Notions of the 'master of one's own destiny' and 'taking charge of one's own subjectivity' need to be tempered by the effects of the "constraining power of economic and social structures" notwithstanding Mandela's personal qualities and accomplishments.²² As African National Congress leader and as state president, "his choices and actions could not escape the global ubiquity and hegemony and power of neo-liberal capital", demonstrated in the shift from the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)²³ to the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme. The latter, described as "a neoliberal macroeconomic policy...and dismantling of the RDP",²⁴ framed state priorities and conditioned institutional change, including the trajectories of change at universities.

Moreover, how do we "reconcile the supposed individual human 'belongness' of Mandela with his socio-political located Ness and their inevitable tensions" and how is his political and

¹⁷ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 168.

¹⁸ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 168, 178.

¹⁹ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 179.

²⁰ Soudien, C. (2017b) p. 179.

²¹ Badat, S. (2017) The Idea of Higher Education as an Instrument for Social Mobility and Societal Transformation: A Critique of Nelson Mandela, pp. 125-136. In Soudien, C. (ed.) (2017) *Nelson Mandela: Comparative Perspectives of His Significance for Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p. 125.

²² Personal communication with a critical reader, Prof. Mala Singh, 11 October 2023.

²³ The RDP spoke of "meeting basic needs of people", "developing our human resources", "building the economy" and "democratising the state and society." 'Human resources' and 'human capital' are peculiar ways of speaking about *people*, but not surprising given the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology and modernisation and human capital theories. *White Paper on Reconstruction and Development*, 23 November 1994, Government Gazette, Vol. 353, No. 16085.

²⁴ Buhlungu, S. (2003) The State of Trade Unionism in Post-Apartheid South Africa in Daniel, J., Habib, A. and Southall, R. (eds.) *The State of the Nation, South Africa 2003-2004*. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, p. 195.

educational ‘legacy’ to be interpreted in light of these tensions?²⁵ Elsewhere, I have taken issue with Mandela’s contention that education is “the great engine of personal development” through which, in his words, “the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, . . . the son of a mineworker can become the head of a mine, [and] a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation.”²⁶ Some individuals certainly can, but Mandela and many others accord education too “immense and unwarranted weight” in social development and transformation and analyse it in isolation from the conditions outside education that “may either facilitate or block the effects” of education.²⁷ Economic and social structures powerfully shape education opportunities and outcomes. As Nasson argues, “the world cannot be transformed without education,” but education on its own “cannot transform the world.”²⁸

Universities

Universities are ideologically and politically contested terrains, with different social forces according them diverse social functions. They display both possibilities and constraints, play contradictory roles and both conserve and reproduce social relations and practices and erode and transform them. Harold Wolpe warned that without economic and social policies that “contribute to the construction of a new South Africa”, universities could “reproduce powerfully entrenched structures generated by apartheid” rather than serve “as instruments of social transformation.”²⁹ That has, indeed, been the case post-1994. Still, although the parochial focus largely on demographics has not eroded entrenched social structures it has created avenues for economic and social advancement for certain classes and social groups of blacks.³⁰ Concomitantly, for many urban and rural impoverished students “access without success has been a revolving door back into poverty.” Socially transforming society entails fashioning economic and social arrangements that create equitable futures for all people. If universities are to be a liberating and “ennobling adventure for individuals [and] communities”, and are to foster human dignity, social solidarity and the public good, they must “transcend the edicts of market accountability and narrow commercial calculations.”³¹ They must, instead, embrace the ethics of social accountability and an expansive humanism that will elevate and empower all . . . people.³² This means embracing higher education as a public good that is deserving of proper public support, ensuring that meaningful opportunities exist for all to access and succeed and valuing the arts, humanities and social sciences.

²⁵ Personal communication with a critical reader, Prof. Mala Singh, 11 October 2023.

²⁶ Mandela, N. (1994) p. 166; Badat, s. (2017) p. 127.

²⁷ Wolpe, H. and Unterhalter, E. (1991) Introduction: reproduction, reform and transformation: approaches to the analysis of education in South Africa. In E Unterhalter, H Wolpe, T Botha, S Badat, T Dlamini and B Khotseng (eds) *Apartheid Education and Popular Struggles*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, pp. 2-3.

²⁸ cited in. Chisholm, L. (2004) ‘Introduction’ in Chisholm, L. (ed.) *Changing Class: Education and Social Change in Post-apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria: Human Science Research Council Press, p.13.

²⁹ Wolpe, H. (1991) Education and social transformation: problems and dilemmas. In E Unterhalter, H Wolpe and T Botha (eds) *Education in a Future South Africa: policy issues for transformation*: London: Heinemann, p. 1, 16.

³⁰ My thanks to Ahmed Essop for emphasising this. Personal communication, 13 October 2023.

³¹ Zeleza, P.T. (2005). Transnational education and African universities. In Association of African Universities, *Cross-border provision and the future of higher education in Africa*. Accra: Association of African Universities, p. 54.

³² Zeleza, P.T. (2005) p. 55.

Entering university at age seventeen and becoming deeply involved in student activism, I have never left the university, over time, my activism graduating to other arenas. I am passionate about the value and promise of universities to contribute to knowledge, advance social justice, cultivate democratic citizenship and promote intellectual, cultural, social and economic development. But I accept too that universities can compromise aspirations and dreams and be powerful mechanisms of social exclusion and injustice. They can be “expensive and ineffectual monuments to “a status quo ante, yesterday’s world preserved in aspic.”³³ They can be also maddeningly insular, parochial, inert and lethargic, “sheltering mediocrity and bigotry” and “obstructing the progress of thought.”³⁴ Even at their best, their contribution could more reproduce the *status quo* than transform it. Education and universities are not an autonomous social force; they are necessary but not a sufficient for social transformation. For meaningful social justice, there must be state economic and social policies that underpin and reinforce the contributions of universities.

In conceiving of universities, we must avoid three traps.³⁵ One is *essentialism*, that accords unvarying purposes, functions, goals and roles to universities across time, space and place. Another trap is *relativism*, imagining that we can apply the term ‘university’ to any kind of institution. The final trap is *universalism*, the Eurocentric idea that universities everywhere must be epistemologically, academically, culturally and institutionally identical to or facsimiles and mimics of modern European universities., whether of the Oxbridge or Humboldtian varieties. Yet, as Mbembe writes, “part of what is wrong with our [universities] is that they are ‘Westernized’” - they “are local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon...that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production” and “disregards other epistemic traditions.”³⁶ This is not a rejection of universalism entirely or universal knowledge, but to insist on its rescue from the hegemony of eurocentrism and the western canon and on epistemological diversity predicated on “open dialogue and the interdependence of - and porous boundaries between - different knowledge traditions” that enables “the reclaiming and affirming of African knowledge traditions.”³⁷ Rather than see ‘canon “as fixed and bounded”, as “a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past...,” it can be considered as “expressing motion, playfulness, discovery and...invention and “open to changing combinations of sense and signification.”³⁸

My forthcoming book is on the *idea* of the university in South Africa; how the university has been thought about since the colonial, segregation and apartheid periods to today and the

³³ Dahrendorf, R. (2000) *Universities after Communism. The Hannah Arendt Prize and the Reform of higher education in East Central Europe*. Hamburg, Körber-Stiftung.

³⁴ Ashby, E. with Anderson, A. (1966) *Universities: British, Indian, African - A Study in the Ecology of Higher Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 4

³⁵ For Prof Ahmed Bawa, signalling of the three traps is useful but requires further exploration. I agree. His questions of how one manages these traps to institutionally learn and facilitate engaging with the complexity that universities are interwoven into is important. He rightly points out that there is a tension between these three axes that needs to be explored. I intend to do so in my forthcoming book on the history of universities in South Africa. Personal communication, 11 October 2023.

³⁶ Mbembe, A.J. (2016) Decolonizing the University: New Directions. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15(1), 29 – 45, p. 32.

³⁷ Essop, A. (2016) Decolonisation debate is a chance to rethink the role of universities. *The Conversation Africa*, 16 August.

³⁸ Said, E. (2004) p. 23, p. 25.

continuities and discontinuities in thinking. It means locating the university within changing social structures, conjunctures, economic, political and social conditions, intellectual and scientific milieus and analysing struggles and their outcomes within and beyond universities. I am learning that the “beautiful thing about history is that it can help us develop a more complex understanding of the things we consider natural in our daily lives...[H]istory can show us that what appears to be timeless is, in fact, deeply historical and dependent on the actions of people with ambitions and agendas.”³⁹ Universities are profoundly shaped by their contexts and by social struggles. Perennial struggles, visible and violent, hidden and routinised, to define the character of universities and their purposes and roles permeate universities and society.

Universities serve fundamental purposes and contribute to societal and individual goals in distinctive ways. The philosopher Gordon Graham notes that universities “cannot have a satisfactory sense of [their] worth if [they have] no sense of what [their] purpose” is.⁴⁰ National university systems today evince highly differentiated and diverse institutions with a range of missions and varying education and social goals. Universities differ in size, and have different academic programmes, admission requirements and academic standards, in accordance with their functions, roles and goals. The meaning of a university is not to be found in those characteristics. Universities are institutional assemblies of scholars, students and support staff whose *raison d'être* is associated with knowledge and advancing the common public good. They are places of learning and scholarship, of engagement between scholars and students and between them and the wider society. They are institutions that make one wonder and free one from wonder. To undertake their work, they require academic freedom and institutional autonomy to buttress that freedom. At the same time, they must be publicly accountable in meaningful and reasonable ways. Increasingly, this meaning is under severe threat. For Sawyerr it is “vital to rehabilitate and preserve the notion, and to fight to reclaim the reality, of the university as a place of learning, reflection, and debate;” “such spaces [must] be retrieved, nurtured, and defended.” In doing this, universities must resist sacrificing core values for the “survival of the institution.”⁴¹ Today, universities are under pressure to undertake multitudinous roles. The *University World News* is a litany of ‘universities should’, ‘universities should’... They must especially be ‘entrepreneurial’ and produce entrepreneurs. The synonyms of entrepreneurial - ‘commercial’ ‘capitalist’, ‘empire-building’ – could aptly describe some universities.

Universities have two fundamental *purposes*. One is to disseminate knowledge to form and cultivate the cognitive character of students. The goal is to produce graduates who, ideally, “can think effectively and critically,” achieve “depth in some field of knowledge” and possess a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves.”⁴² University graduates must have “a broad knowledge of other

³⁹ Arndt, J. S. (2023) Zulu vs Xhosa: how colonialism used language to divide South Africa’s two biggest ethnic groups, *The Conversation*, 11 May
[Zulu vs Xhosa: how colonialism used language to divide South Africa's two biggest ethnic groups \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/zulu-vs-xhosa-how-colonialism-used-language-to-divide-south-africa-s-two-biggest-ethnic-groups)

⁴⁰ Graham, G. (2005) *The Institution of Intellectual Values: Realism and Idealism in Higher Education*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, p. 158.

⁴¹ Sawyerr, A. (2004) Challenges Facing African Universities: Selected Issues. *African Studies Review*, 47(1), 1-59, p. 45.

⁴² The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*. Washington: The World Bank, p. 84.

cultures and other times”; be “able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it”; have “some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems” and should be able to “communicate with cogency.”⁴³ Beyond students, universities are duty bound to also enhance the knowledge of other social groups, as part of creating an informed, cultivated and critical citizenry. Newman argues in *The Idea of a University* that the object of universities is “the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement,” contending that “if its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.”⁴⁴ Newman overstates the university’s knowledge dissemination purpose but is correct to draw attention to the centrality of “the diffusion and extension of knowledge” and the importance of learning and teaching, increasingly neglected in the often indecent scramble for research outputs – more accurately, for research subsidies.

A second purpose of universities is to create *knowledge* that advances understanding of the natural and social worlds and enriches humanity’s accumulated scientific and cultural inheritances and heritage. This means testing the knowledge produced by previous generations, dismantling the beliefs and claims that masquerade for knowledge, reinvigorating knowledge, and sharing research findings openly. It involves undertaking research into the most arcane and abstract issues and the “most theoretical and intractable uncertainties of knowledge” and striving to apply scientific discoveries for the benefit of humankind.⁴⁵ The pursuit of knowledge has both short-term and long-term concerns. On the one hand, universities grapple with urgent and immediate issues and problems and seek solutions to these. On the other hand, they delve into issues “that may not appear immediately relevant to others, but have the proven potential to yield great future benefit.”⁴⁶ Above all, universities are concerned with asking *questions*, formulating the right questions or the better questions.

Community engagement⁴⁷ in the form of *service learning*, which connects teaching-learning, research and service, is today an accepted third purpose of universities. Community engagement is more than a university’s responsiveness to its context. A university sensitive to conditions and challenges does not mean that it is engaged with communities, however ‘community’ is defined. At different moments, in differing ways and to differing degrees, community engagement has

⁴³ The Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000) p. 84.

⁴⁴ Newman, J. H. (1907) *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated*. London: Longmans Green, p. ix. <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/>.

⁴⁵ Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) *What are Universities For?* Leuven: League of European Research Universities, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) p. 3.

⁴⁷ Prof Bawa poses whether ‘engagement’ rather than ‘community engagement’ should be considered the third purpose to also take into account engagement that leads to industrial innovation, engagement with government and the state and other extra-university actors and institutions - a knowledge mediation role between the world of scholarly endeavour and that of the world of applications. He suggests that the idea of loops in knowledge processes becomes important here in shaping knowledge production pathways that involve applications imperatives - and thinking about co-creation approaches. For him, this would help to tease out the inherent tensions in the purposes of universities. I concur that there are ‘inherent tensions’ in the purposes of universities, whether one has an expansive notion of engagement or a more limited one. I am pondering his proposition, mulling whether his more capacious notion of engagement is not already encompassed by ‘community engagement’ as service learning or is not an aspect of the other core purposes of universities.

also encompassed civic duties, such as community outreach and student and staff volunteer activities. Its more recent conception as ‘service-learning’ creatively links the university’s knowledge creation and dissemination purposes with service. No longer an add-on, disconnected from the university’s core activities, service-learning is an important “curricular innovation.”⁴⁸

South Africa manifests a pervasive crisis of governance, under a liberation movement that post-1994 has abandoned its principles, displayed remarkable ineptitude, been mired in corruption and has undergone morbid deformities. If corrupt elites and their foot-soldiers gorge on state enterprises, public universities are not immune. Jansen vividly documents the nature and forms of corruption.⁴⁹ The focus on governance and finances at the expense of core academic activities, though, may not fully capture the scope and extent of the corruption and corrosion at universities. Antonio Gramsci advances the idea of an ‘organic crisis’ to denote the existence of “incurable structural contradictions” of an ideological, political and economic nature.⁵⁰ Such “organic crises...erupt...in a wide series of polemics, debates about fundamental...moral and intellectual questions, in a crisis in the relations of political representation and the parties...That is what Gramsci calls the crisis of authority, which is nothing but the crisis of hegemony or general crisis of the state.”⁵¹ Stuart Hall notes that for Gramsci “a crisis is not an immediate event but a process: it can last for a long time, and can be very differently resolved: by restoration, by reconstruction or by passive transformism.”⁵²

An ‘organic crisis’ is normally resolved either through ‘formative action’ by the ruling class or social revolution from below.⁵³ Purely defensive initiatives cannot preserve ruling class hegemony. ‘Formative action’ entails economic, political and ideological restructuring and significant reforms. South Africa and its universities are mired in an ‘organic crisis’ that requires ‘formative action’. The ruling party conflates itself and the state, is mired in short-term survival electioneering and incapable of uprooting pervasive corruption and decisively and coherently addressing serious economic and social challenges. There is no sign of ‘formative action’ that requires “a co-ordinated and coherent range of policy responses,” a “plan of action”, and “strong and focused leadership from the top” that can restore “confidence, credibility, and trust.”⁵⁴

At the root of the ideological malaise of universities is the embrace of neo-liberal prescripts. Harvey describes succinctly the “origins, rise, and implications” of neoliberalism as a doctrine.⁵⁵ Neo-liberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.”⁵⁶ It holds that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency

⁴⁸ Stanton, T.K. (2008). *Introduction*. In *Service-Learning in the Disciplines: Lessons from the Field*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education/JET Education Services, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Jansen, J. (2023) *Corrupted: A study of chronic dysfunction in South African universities*. Braamfontein: Wits University Press .

⁵⁰ Saul, J. S. and Gelb, S. (1986) *The Crisis in South Africa*. London: Zed Books p. 11, 57.

⁵¹ Hall, S. (1988) *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the crisis of the left*. London: Verso.

⁵² Hall, S. (1988)

⁵³ Saul, JS and S Gelb (1986) *The Crisis in South Africa*. London: Zed Books, p. 211

⁵⁴ Jill Marcus, ex-Governor of the Reserve Bank, cited in Isa (2013).

⁵⁵ Harvey, D. (2005). *A Short History of Neoliberalism*. London: Oxford University Press

⁵⁶ Harvey, (2005) p. 2.

of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey 2005: 3). If there are no markets “in areas such as...water, education, health care, [etc.], then they must be created, by state action if necessary” (Harvey 2005: 2). ‘Development’ is reduced to economic growth and enhanced economic performance, as opposed to “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (Sen, 1999:3). Neo-liberalism and globalization have entrenched a “market society”, an associated rampant “culture of materialism” and “Narcissist hedonism” (Nayyar, 2008:5).

Post-1994, neoliberal ideas, embraced voluntarily or sullenly, globalisation, the South African political economy and state policies have powerfully shaped universities. The “logic of the market has...defined the purposes of universities largely in terms of their [economic] role,”⁵⁷ with public investment being largely justified in terms of preparing students for the labour market. Universities are considered “just supermarkets for a variety of public and private goods that are currently in demand, and whose value is defined by their perceived aggregate financial value.”⁵⁸ Driven by market forces and the technological revolution, globalization has shaped the “ways and means of providing higher education”, “what is taught and what is researched, and has shifted “both student interests and university offerings away from broader academic studies and towards narrower vocational programmes.”⁵⁹ The harnessing of universities for economic advantage has resulted in the privileging of research undertaken by the natural, medical, and business sciences and engineering. There is benign tolerance or outright neglect of the arts and humanities and, to a lesser extent the social sciences.⁶⁰

The ‘economic’ crisis of universities is amply evident. Inadequate state funding has compromised the ability of universities to discharge their critical purposes, transform the nature and quality of learning-teaching and research and institutional cultures and to promote equity and inclusion. Burgeoning student enrolment, from 473 000 in 1993 to 1 094 808 in 2020, has been accompanied by a decline in the per-student subsidy, and the average teacher: student ratio has

⁵⁷ Berdahl, R.M. (2008) *Developed Universities and the Developing World: Opportunities and Obligations in* Weber, L.E. and Duderstadt, J.J. (ed.) *The Globalization of Higher Education*. London: Economica Ltd, p. 48

⁵⁸ Boulton, G. and Lucas, C. (2008) *What are Universities For?* Leuven: League of European Research Universities, September, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Nayyar, D. (2008). *Globalization: What Does it Mean for Higher Education*. In L.E. Weber and J.J. Duderstadt (Eds.) *The Globalization of Higher Education* (pp. 3-14). London: Economica Ltd, p. 7.

Duderstadt, J., Taggart, J. and Weber, L. (2008). *The Globalization of Higher Education*. In L.E Weber, and J.J Duderstadt (Eds.) *The Globalization of Higher Education* (pp. 273-290). London: Economica Ltd, p. 275

⁶⁰ Yet, the arts and humanities have a critical contribution to make to culture and society, with the responsibility to investigate and interpret human activity and history in all its rich variety, to present it in multitudinous forms and to conserve it in the form of archives. While “the modern and global world constantly confronts humanity with the far-reaching effects of politics, economics, science and technology, the roles of image and word, of song and story in the understanding of self and other, of society and nature remain primary. It is through the arts and humanities “humanity constructs its image of and discourse about itself and in which its anchors human dignity and collective understanding. Their work must be advanced in tandem with that of the sciences if a hospitable world is to survive.” It is their task to “recreate the narrative...of humanity, which may be told or sung or depicted or enacted and ultimately needs all those forms of expression to attain what we grasp as its integrity.” They alone are able “to capture human experience persuasively and carry forward the values of humanity as we have come to understand them, historically and philosophically, as the collective tissue of collective identity” (Lewis, 2011). It has their task too to interrogate critically ideas on development, progress, democracy, equality and inequality, their meanings, and their articulation within divergent discourses. Research must engage with diverse developmental challenges, without being reduced to purely utilitarian uses and to economic needs alone.

increased over 50%, from 20.5 in 2003 to 31 in 2020.⁶¹ Nationally, an average of 65% of academics are on contracts. During the past decade, the higher education ministry and department have demonstrated little serious, consistent leadership on important issues. The consequences of inadequate funding are pervasive and disturbing and destructive of the quality of academic provision and graduates and success rates, with huge demands being made on academics and growing burnout. Access, opportunity and success remain conditioned by class and 'race'. Inadequately funded, the pursuit by public universities of 'third stream income' to supplement state and tuition income has often resulted in "the commercialization of universities (which) means business in education."⁶²

The political problems of universities are evident in perennial student protests and governance and management crises associated with inappropriate or inadequate leadership. The assessors report on the University of South Africa concludes that its management is "part of the problem" and lacks "the maturity required to effectively manage a complex university". The assessor adds that he cannot fathom how some of the members could be "entrusted with such a colossal responsibility to run the institution of this size and depth."⁶³ There is "overwhelming evidence that the functioning and efficacy of both council and management fall below an expected standard of an effective university that looks after the best interests of its students, staff and resources."⁶⁴ Those comments could apply to several other universities. The important principle of 'cooperative governance' has been eroded. Increasingly, universities resemble business hierarchies, with continuous diminution of academic self-rule and senate authority over the academic project. A corporatist centralism has emerged in the absence of effective senate and faculty oversight, with extensive powers vested in the administrative leadership and management. The result of corporatisation combined with dubious leadership and management capabilities are gory, even if they may make for salacious reading.

Whether as effects of the political leanings of the state and of university leaders and managers, or ineffectual state steering and inadequate state support, commodification, commercialisation, corporatization and managerialism have corrupted academic values, compromised core academic functions, corroded quality, bred individualism, neutralized meaningful academic citizenship and triggered perennial student protests. National chauvinist, populist and individualized parochial identity politics disconnected from questions of social relations and material issues animate struggles. Radical vocabulary, including in its decolonial guises, masks narrow and career self-interest, as opposed to "building reflexive solidarities within universities and the serious pursuit of progressive and "emancipatory higher education imaginations and futures."⁶⁵

⁶¹ Essop, A. (2020) *The Changing Size and Shape of the Higher Education System in South Africa, 2005-2017*. Johannesburg: Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of Johannesburg, p. 37; Council on Higher Education (2022) *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2020*. Pretoria: CHE, pp. 90.

⁶² Nayyar, D. (2008) p. 9

⁶³ cited by Sobuwa, Y. (2023) *Failing leadership: Scathing Unisa report recommends council, management be 'relieved of their duties.'* *News 24*, 17 May

⁶⁴ cited by Sobuwa, Y. (2023)

⁶⁵ see Badat, S. (2022) *A Critical University Studies South Africa Network: Some Provocations*. Keynote Address at the Advancing Critical University Studies Across Africa Colloquium: Self-Reflexive Solidarities in Techno-Rational Times. Nelson Mandela University, 2 November 2022.

Colonialism and apartheid profoundly shaped universities in South Africa, establishing patterns of systemic inclusion, exclusion and marginalisation of institutions, social classes and groups. This legacy continues to impose onerous conditions on transforming and renewing universities. Universities continue, in functionally differentiated ways, to reproduce a highly inequitable social order. *All* universities have the challenge of becoming *South African/African* universities, as opposed to being universities in South Africa/Africa, replicas of European universities; of engaging creatively with the historical “legacies of intellectual colonisation and racialisation” and patriarchy;⁶⁶ of creating institutional cultures that genuinely respect and appreciate difference, diversity and inclusion – class, gender, national, linguistic, religious, sexual orientation, epistemological and methodological – and of cultivating spaces for the flowering of epistemologies, ontologies, theories, methodologies, objects and questions other than those that have dominated scholarship.

It is not mysterious, powerful ideological and technological forces, ineffectual state steering and inadequate funding alone that have carried universities to where they are today. Ideologies and technologies require social carriers. Complicity, by commission or omission, consent, voluntary or sullen, fatigue, fear and apathy in differing ways and to differing degrees have also played their part. Depending on positionality relative to status, authority, power and influence in universities, some actors have been the harbingers of commercialisation and corporatization. Self-justifying, defensive, self-serving platitudes abound - ‘you don’t understand the realities’, ‘you don’t understand the financial situation’. Dilemmas of choice are not the absence of choice. Other actors, in woeful neglect of their academic citizenship duties, have failed to hold the leadership and senior managers accountable, resulting in the erosion of the authority of university senates.

Motala, Senekal and Vally contend that “a critical factor is the indifference of the vast majority of academics, and their single-minded pursuit of individualist goals also driven by the corporatised regimes of knowledge production.⁶⁷ They remain unconcerned about the very effects of their narrow pursuit and its diminution of their *collective and individual* rights. At this very time there is a wide range of issues that must be of great concern to academics - which it is not.”⁶⁸ They bemoan “the unprepossessing pursuit of ranking and rating, the lure of executive mobility in place of serious social scholarship and a host of other troubling characteristics, which are becoming more and more pervasive in academia.”⁶⁹ Yet other actors, owing to their status or their workloads or being perennially on contract, have been effectively relegated to being, or have for understandable appreciable reasons become, observers. Genuflection to ‘inclusion’

⁶⁶ Du Toit, A. (2000) ‘Critic and Citizen: The Intellectual, Transformation and Academic Freedom’. *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1, p. 103.

⁶⁷ This recalls Althusser’s comment: “I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning they ‘teach’ against the ideology, the system and the practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero. But they are rare and how many (the majority) do not even begin to suspect the ‘work’ the system (which is bigger than they are and crushes them) forces them to do, or worse, put all their heart and ingenuity into performing it with the most advanced awareness....” Althusser, L. (1971) *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (Notes towards an Investigation. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

⁶⁸ Motala, E., Senekal, I. and Vally. S. (2023) A Commentary on Student Struggles, Violence and Organisational Weakness. *Education as Change*, Vol 27, pp. 1-10.

⁶⁹ Motala, E. Senekal, I. and Vally. S. (2023).

aside, at many universities there is no meaningful involvement of academics in university governance and especially on matters affecting the academic project.

What is to be Done?

What is to be Done? We need, first and foremost, deep institutional conversations and a national conversation on the nature and meaning of universities. This conversation must avoid both essentialising universities and nostalgia about idyllic past conditions that either never existed or existed only for some. At the same time, this conversation cannot but also discuss the state of the South African society, economy and state given how those powerfully shape the circumstances of universities. We must enter this conversation understanding that being scholars is a *profession*, “a special class of occupation” different from the crafts.⁷⁰ Skill is important, but a profession involves more: it is marked by the “incorporation of systematically studied knowledge into...practice.”⁷¹ University teaching is not in the first instance about the *application* of knowledge; it is about disseminating knowledge that is either discovered or acquired, including the methods of the “discovery, interpretation and application of knowledge.”⁷² Even where application may be the aim, “the university teacher’s concern is with knowledge about application” and not immediately the practical application of the knowledge that is taught.⁷³ Moreover, and as a fundamental point, the academic profession “is not primarily or exclusively oriented to the market. It does not produce to meet an effective consumer’s demand.”⁷⁴ Universities and academics will never cover their costs, and it is puerile to imagine so. This is not to condone the profligacy sometimes observed at universities. But appointing academics and academic managers for their fund-raising abilities rather than their intellectual leadership and knowledge contributions is sad testimony to what is prized. Being a university student entails obligations related to knowledge, a commitment to intellectual labour and duty to society, not the pursuit of a parchment and purely private interests. Our conversation must grapple seriously and imaginatively with the purposes, functions, goals and roles of universities in South Africa, taking both the public good and place seriously.

Like there are varying and contesting ideas on social justice and development, that range from thin anaemic conceptions to thick, strong and extensive conceptions that are linked to different notions of the ‘good society’, the same applies to ideas on the ‘public good.’ It is, therefore, important to clarify the meaning of the ‘public good’ and the public and social interests that are to be advanced by universities. The ‘public good’ implies, at a minimum, a substantive commitment to values such as anti-racism and anti-sexism, equity, diversity and inclusion. It should also embrace expansive conceptions of social justice, development and democracy and bold refutation of doctrines that seek to yoke universities to narrow private and parochial interests. Mala Singh rightly argues that the public good is not merely “one goal and policy plank among others” in a ‘marketplace of ideas’ and narratives” about the goals of universities; it trumps “all other values and approaches and...constitute[s] the foundational narrative and

⁷⁰ Shils, E. (1977) *The Academic Ethos*. In van der Merwe, H. and Welsh, D. (ed.) (1977) *The Future of the University in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip, p. 5.

⁷¹ Shils, E. (1977) p. 5.

⁷² Shils, E. (1977) p. 6.

⁷³ Shils, E. (1977) p. 6.

⁷⁴ Shils, E. (1977) p. 6.

platform...⁷⁵ The idea of the ‘public good’ is an “alternative social imaginary” for “wrest[ing] higher education away from its neo-liberal” obsessions and trajectory.⁷⁶ One cannot assume support for public good ideals among either university staff or students, because “both constituencies benefit from private positional goods availed by higher education.”⁷⁷ To “get beyond commitment ‘noise’ or ad hoc and special projects, concrete questions have to be confronted about what public-good obligations and responsibilities accrue to different role players in the core functions and activities of higher education.”⁷⁸

In so far as place is concerned, Louise Vincent rightly argues that issues “related ultimately to the purpose of the university entails a deep engagement, both literally and theoretically, with the notion of ‘place’”, with the idea “of the university as situated in ‘place’ - geography, history, social relations, economics and politics – all the forces that combine to make an empty space a ‘place’.”⁷⁹ To “engage with place is to reflect on people in a place and to ask how they might inhabit that place. The ability to inhabit, as opposed to just be resident, requires detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness.” Place and space are dynamic, “never finished, never closed” and enmeshed with “heterogeneity, relationality, liveliness.”⁸⁰ Fundamental to the idea of place “is the idea of an open yet bounded realm within which the things of the world can appear and events take place.” Place possesses “enough breadth and space” and “room enough to allow an engagement with the world.”⁸¹ ‘Place’ is where people “form relationships and social networks, develop a sense of community and learn to live with others. It offers a helpful way of answering the persistent problem that plagues a ‘public good’ framing of higher education: which public and what ‘good’?”

Far from “objective or neutral”, ‘place’ is “inscribed with relations of power” and how “power works in and through places has to be confronted...” Drawing on Freire’s idea of ‘reading the world’ to ‘read the word’, ‘place’ speaks

to knowledge as context sensitive rather than decontextualized and the need for a close relationship between theory and practice, as at least part of the measure of the significance and validity of the knowledge produced and disseminated. Instead of [immunising] themselves from their surrounding communities universities, understood in this frame, actively seek exposure and collaboration – because that is what they are ‘for’. Such an approach has wider implications not just for pedagogy alone, but also student recruitment, the content of curricula, and for research practices and priorities.⁸²

A “critical pedagogy of place” offers two potentially fertile possibilities. First, it permits imagining “what forms of connection and action might emerge” from an engagement with ‘place’ “and sees the cultivation of these possibilities as central to education, and to what the university

⁷⁵ Singh, M. (2014) Higher education and the public good: precarious potential? *Acta Academica: Critical views on society, culture and politics*, 46(1), 98-118, p. 107.

⁷⁶ Singh, M. (2014) p. 107.

⁷⁷ Singh, M. (2014) p. 111.

⁷⁸ Singh, M. (2014) p. 111.

⁷⁹ Vincent, L. (2016) Higher education transformation. What is the university ‘for’? The notion of ‘place’ as a starting point for higher education transformation in South Africa. Research Proposal.

⁸⁰ Doreen B. Massey (2005) *For Space*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, p. 9 ; cited in Desai and Vahed (2023) *Durban’s Cabah: Bunny Chows, Bolsheviks and Bioscopes*, p.11.

⁸¹ Malpas, J. (2018) *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. London: Routledge, p. 33; cited in Desai and Vahed (2023), p.13.

⁸² Vincent, L. (2016).

is ‘for’.”⁸³ Inherent in this approach is the opportunity to root and knit the university within the fabric of its society and to pursue its social purposes in close connection with its diverse economic, social, and political challenges. Second, it offers the possibility of a “transformed epistemological practice” that is “both embodied and contextualized” as opposed to current epistemologies that are “disembodied (they assume that their standpoint is universal when in fact it is gendered, ‘raced’, classed, sexed, etc.) and decontextualized (rooted in the dominance of Western paradigms, histories, and priorities).”⁸⁴

To mention epistemology is to draw attention to the connection between biography, geography, epistemic location and social location, and to ideas on what knowledge is, the making of knowledge and which knowledge is to be valued and shared with others.⁸⁵ Overcoming dominant Eurocentric epistemologies means producing “knowledge that is decolonial in intent and practice”⁸⁶ and forging a “decolonial epistemic perspective” that is predicated on a “broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon.”⁸⁷ It “cannot be based on an abstract universal (one particularly that raises itself as universal global design), but would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects towards a pluriversal as opposed to a universal world.”⁸⁸ It is, however, *not* about imposing a decolonial canon that becomes a new orthodoxy. It is about robust engagement around knowledge that reveals other kinds of knowledge and the existence of “diverse communities of problem solving.” This enables knowledge creation to become “a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, manifold heuristics of problem solving.”⁸⁹

To argue to take place seriously, is not advocacy to limit the horizons of universities to their immediate local geographical vicinities and communities. Place, as noted, is ‘never closed’, characterised by ‘relationality and provides scope for ‘the things of the world’ to enter and for ‘engagement with the world.’ Moreover, the ‘public good’ cannot be conceived in purely local and national terms. By virtue of their core activities, universities are distinctively connected to the global, straddling the local and the global. They are imbricated in the wicked problems of humanity and the global challenges of climate change and its effects, clean air, political turmoil and refugees and the like, which have implications for research and teaching. Effectively addressing these challenges entails acting globally and implies a conception of the public good that is global rather than just local. In a differentiated system of universities such as that of South Africa, different universities will, of course, connect in different ways and to differing degrees.⁹⁰

⁸³ Vincent, L. (2016)

⁸⁴ Vincent, L. (2016).

⁸⁵ See Grosfoguel, R. (2007) The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political-economy Paradigms. *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3: 211–23; Haraway, D. (1988) “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3: 575–97; Mignolo, W. (2011) *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁸⁶ Bhabra, G.K. (2014) *Connected Sociologies*. London: Bloomsbury, p.149.

⁸⁷ Grosfoguel, R. (2007) p. 212.

⁸⁸ Grosfoguel, R. (2007) p. 212.

⁸⁹ Visvanathan, S. (2009) The Search for Cognitive Justice. Seminar: Web edition. https://www.india-seminar.com/2009/597/597_shiv_visvanathan.htm, accessed April 1, 2021.

⁹⁰ My thanks to Prof Ahmed Bawa for the engagement on this paragraph.

Second, in 2001 the Council on Higher Education observed that in 20 years we would need to revisit our national institutional landscape. Is it time for another comprehensive size and shape exercise that analyses the value, strengths and shortcomings of the current number, sizes, types, distribution and academic configurations of universities, reflects on the previous mergers and incorporations and addresses how many students can the university system meaningfully sustain in light of available finances? Do the balance in types of universities needs to be changed, or do their qualification and programme mixes need revision, or do their sizes need to be capped or do new universities need to be created through hiving off the distant campuses of some universities? It would be important to locate the question of the size and shape of universities within the wider higher education system and confront its continuing inverted pyramid. This would be an opportunity to proactively address current and future needs in relation to envisaged development trajectories and student enrolments and would obviate whimsical sudden announcements of new universities.

Third, the funding framework for research is urgent need of an overhaul - its assumptions, purposes and goals, performative nature and allocation rules and mechanisms. It has fostered perversities that corrode knowledge and research quality – monetary incentives for scholarship, predator journal publishing, academic malpractices, dubious peer-reviewing and external examining, postgraduate theses of questionable standards, affiliation by universities of fellows for financial reasons, inflated publishing outputs and an unholy chase by universities for publication and graduate output subsidies. University scholars seem to gaily share in university's financial largesse for research outputs, even if they rightly criticise performance bonuses for senior administrators. Financial rewards for research in academics' pockets diminish the available research funds. A new research funding framework is needed that eliminates current perversities and prioritises equity, quality and development. It must effectively support early career researchers, postdocs and postgraduate students, research infrastructure such as journals, and local academic presses. It must optimally support basic and applied research and mobilise funds for research on the key wicked problems that face South Africa and humanity that is carried out by equitable, diverse and inclusive multi-institutional and multinational research teams in consultation with key communities.

University reward systems powerfully signal the triumph of research over teaching, even though over 70% of students exit before postgraduate studies. There are no 'performance bonuses' for the art and craft of diligent and effective teaching. Increasingly neglected because of research' supposed prestige and weight in global rankings or because it is considered an innate ability or 'common-sense' activity, we must eschew the misguided naturalisation of teaching and learning practice. Approaches to teaching that assume that teaching can be improved through workshops on 'skills' or 'tips for better teaching' are inadequate. We need a rigorously theorised approach to teaching that engages contextual realities, is based on research and builds scholarship on teaching and learning.

Fourth, genuine 'cooperative governance' must characterize relations between councils, university leaders, senates and scholars and students and between universities and state. The independence and authority of university senates and faculty boards must be wrested back from administrators. I commend the assessors report on the University of South Africa (UNISA) that states that the senate must reclaim its "status as a custodian of curriculum transformation, high

academic standards, robust engagement on teaching and learning, research and innovation, social justice...and a caring culture for students and academic staff”.⁹¹ This call applies to the senates of other universities too, not just UNISA alone.

Fifth, the interventions needed entail a properly capacitated and capable higher education ministry and department that are a) interested in addressing key challenges, and b) capable of steering and providing effective leadership. More generally, they imply a developmental state and a ruling party that is committed to substantive social transformation. On all these scores, the prospects are bleak. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the wider ecosystem of universities means that universities will have to navigate the challenges of massifying enrolments, equity, quality, development, underfunding, the pervasive and myriad forms of social violence, increasing mental health issues and ensuring consistent power and water supplies and, not least, student protests, by and large on their own. Do universities have the capacities to cope with this ‘demand overload’? What does this mean for the future of universities?⁹²

Sixth, discourses of state officials and university leaders continue to be peppered with the term ‘transformation’ but whether it remains a policy imperative is a moot point. Paraphrasing Sarah Ahmed, we can pose “what recedes when (transformation) becomes a view’ and consider ‘what (transformation) does by focusing on what (transformation) obscures.”⁹³ As Mamdani warned,⁹⁴ ‘transformation’ has been largely reduced to equity and a concern with demographics rather than with democratisation and academic and institutional transformation. Instead of creatively pursuing equity, quality and development *simultaneously* within and beyond universities, with all their attendant paradoxes and social dilemmas,⁹⁵ the state and universities have failed to do so effectively and have sacrificed or prioritized one or other value with grave consequences. For various reasons, the designated instruments of planning, funding and quality assurance, have been ineffectual for steering and transforming universities, The arc is the triumph of a diluted and limited ‘equity’ and individual historical rectification at the expense of quality, development and institutional transformation. The dominance of “corporate power”, “the continuing rise of right wing, populist nationalism’, the avarice of business and political elites and an ineffectual state, all make a more egalitarian South Africa “as remote as ever.”⁹⁶ Perhaps the best that, currently, can be hoped for by those social forces committed to transformation and decolonization is to fight for non-reformist reforms.⁹⁷

Gramsci’s biographer Quintin Hoare remarks that ideas are utopian not because of what they seek to achieve but when they are conceived outside of humans and actors. Transformation is a

⁹¹ Cited in Sobuwa, 2023

⁹² My thanks to Prof Ahmed Bawa for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and posing these issues.

⁹³ Ahmed, S. (2012) *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 14.

⁹⁴ Cited in Sikhosana, M. (1993) “Affirmative Action: Its Possibilities and Limitations”. *EPU Working Paper No. 1*. Education Policy Unit, University of Natal, May, p. 16.

⁹⁵ See again, Hardy, H. (ed.) (1991) *Isiah Berlin - The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. New York: Alfred Knopf, chapter 1.

⁹⁶ Maylam, P (2020) ‘A post-pandemic world is unlikely to focus on meeting need over human greed’, *The Conversation*, 30 June <https://theconversation.com/a-post-pandemic-world-is-unlikely-to-focus-on-meeting-need-over-human-greed-141228> accessed on 30 October.

⁹⁷ See Saul, J. (1992) ‘John Saul replies’, *New Left Review* 1/195.

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/i195/articles/john-saul-john-saul-replies>

chimera in the absence of strong democratic radical student and staff organisations, and alliances between them and wider social forces, that contest social relations in and beyond universities. Organised radical movements reveal the “stakes”, make “power visible”, struggle for radical reforms and “make society hear their messages and translate these messages into political decision making, while the movements maintain their autonomy.”⁹⁸ The aftermath of the 2015-2016 student protests has demonstrated the limits of student political action. Student organisations created a new higher education terrain and agenda, but since then there has been little national and institutional-level engagement with that agenda. Without a confluence with other social forces, student movements will be characterized by “brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority” and by “frenzied ultra-left gestures.”⁹⁹ While critical as a catalyst for reforms and transformation, deep reflection is needed about the nature and content of student political activism. There are many illusions about universities in class societies as engines of social transformation. Despite talk of ‘intersectionality’, there must be doubts about the transformative potential of focusing on personal pain, trauma, and identity in ways that are unconnected with the question of political power and the material conditions for social justice.¹⁰⁰ If students, are critical in initiating, if not always sustaining change, equally vital are academics. Post-1994 though, academics have failed to contest ideologies and administrative power that have eroded academic values and academic rule. The absence of strong radical academic and support staff organisations that mobilize around both academic and employment issues is a serious weakness. It raises questions about the interests, consciousness and agency of academics and about who will “educate the educator” as part of a transformative praxis within universities and society more generally.¹⁰¹

In Closing

Celebratory, congratulatory back-patting about performance in dubious global rankings, research outputs and the like aside, the realities of universities are disconcerting and distressing, whether in terms of their prospects of substantive institutional transformation or contributing to wider social transformation. A “pessimism of the “intellect”, though, must not give way to despair and demoralization but coexist with an “optimism of the will.” Mandela writes, “there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.”¹⁰² Considering the conditions, killings and attempted assassinations at Fort Hare, and Mandela’s comment that “many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountain-tops of our desires” is far from dramatic.¹⁰³ Notwithstanding the challenges confronting scholars and universities we must, in Mandela’s words, still keep our “head pointed toward the sun, (our) feet moving forward.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Melucci, A (1985) ‘The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements’, *Social Research*, 52(4), p. 815.

⁹⁹ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1973) *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p. 265

¹⁰⁰ Kelly, R. D. G. (2016) ‘Black study, black struggle’, *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*.

<http://bostonreview.net/forum/robin-d-g-kelley-black-study-black-struggle> accessed on 22 October 2020.

¹⁰¹ Marx, K. (1845) *Theses on Feuerbach*. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.pdf> accessed on 28 October 2020.

¹⁰² [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela#Long_Walk_to_Freedom_\(1995\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela#Long_Walk_to_Freedom_(1995))

¹⁰³ Brook Napier, D. (2017) “... Many More Hills to Climb”: Reflections on the Legacy of Nelson Mandela and the Relevance for Educational Transformation, pp. 151-163. In Soudien, C. (ed.) (2017) *Nelson Mandela: Comparative Perspectives of His Significance for Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p. 152.

¹⁰⁴ [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela#Long_Walk_to_Freedom_\(1995\)](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela#Long_Walk_to_Freedom_(1995))

Mandela states that “I have walked the long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter. I have made mistakes along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.”¹⁰⁵ He adds that “I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But, I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”¹⁰⁶ For Soudien, “this realisation that ‘there are many more hills to climb’ brings Mandela to a central insight about the *self*... This *self* had to make a commitment to never stop learning. It is this commitment... from which *hope* springs because it is through learning that alternatives present themselves to one.”¹⁰⁷ Mandela observed that the post-1994 state “cannot do it all for you”, that “you must do it yourselves.”¹⁰⁸ There is another important message: to take care of oneself, ‘to rest’ and recuperate, to reflexively ‘look back’ and appreciate what has been achieved since 1994 and to recognise that the ‘long walk is not yet ended.’

We can have little illusions about the commitment and capacity of the current state and ruling party to complete the long walk. But despite the constraints, we can and must create South African/African universities and advance Madiba’s call to “act together as a united people... for the birth of a new world”, to ensure “justice for all” and foster living “in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”¹⁰⁹ Human agency is critical. It requires academics, students and other actors to contest the logics that underpin and suffuse our universities and to purposefully set them on a different path that valorises their great promise. Said writes that invention requires “reassembling from past performances, as opposed to the romantic use of invention as something you create from scratch. That is, one hypothesizes a better situation from the known historical and social facts.”¹¹⁰ There is a need for “intellectual performances on many fronts, in many places, many styles that keep in play both the sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation.”¹¹¹ This work, as Bourdieu recognises, cannot be undertaken “by a single great intellectual, a master-thinker..., or by the authorized spokesperson for a group or an institution presumed to speak in the name of those without voice, union, party, and so on.”¹¹²

Transforming our universities entails confronting complicity, resistance, inertia and apprehension. It calls for “the collective intellectual,” formations that work on common questions and “play an irreplaceable role, by helping to create the social conditions for the collective production of realist utopias.”¹¹³ Alongside coordinated efforts, there is always place for individual intellectual and practical actions, for “everyday acts of resurgence” by “individuals

¹⁰⁵ Brook Napier, (2017) p. 151.

¹⁰⁶ cited in Brook Napier, (2017) p. 151.

¹⁰⁷ cited by Brook Napier, (2017) p. 152.

¹⁰⁸ cited in Brook Napier, (2017) p. 152.

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.ru.ac.za/vice-chancellor/tributetonelsonmandela/news/hambakahlenelsonrolihlahlamandela.html>

¹¹⁰ Said, E. (2004) *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 140.

¹¹¹ Said, E. (2004) p. 140.

¹¹² Said, E. (2004) p. 138.

¹¹³ Said, E. (2004) p. 138.

committed to change.”¹¹⁴ The South African university will not come into being through epistemological and theoretical work alone, only through political action and struggle.

¹¹⁴ Ritskes, E. (2012) “What is decolonization and why does it matter?” *Intercontinental Cry*. 21 September, p. 88. <https://intercontinentalcry.org/what-is-decolonization-and-why-does-it-matter/>